

# (Assisted?) Suicide by Assimilation

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Purim is, arguably, the most joyous occasion on the Jewish calendar. The holiday is very user-friendly, as there is no prohibition against performing ordinary weekday activities. Its most challenging religious requirement is to listen to the reading of the *Megilla*, the book of Esther written on a scroll. Aside from that, it's a happy day with a festive meal, distribution of treats to one's friends, and gifts to the poor. A sense of unity prevails among the Jews as we celebrate the salvation of our people from the edict of annihilation instigated by the evil Haman.

The theme of deliverance from our enemies is central to the Jewish historical experience. We are a people that lives in the shadow of hatred and are always on the verge of a major catastrophe. At the Passover *Seder*, we recite "In every generation they rise against us to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed is He, saves us from their hands." Can anyone deny that the great sages who composed these words were prophets?

For American Jews, the history of antisemitism is abstract and remote from personal experience. As a kid in the 1950s, I did encounter some verbal bigotry and bullying from gentile youths. That was the time before political correctness took hold, and expressions of prejudice were still "acceptable." Matters have changed dramatically during the course of my life. In the last 50 years, the country has undergone a major transformation on the issue of tolerance. It now categorically condemns all forms of bigotry based on race, religion, color, gender, and even sexual orientation.

We have witnessed the election of an African-American president, which was inconceivable when I was young. It was once regarded as a self-evident truth that there could never be a Jewish president. In 2000, the Gore-Lieberman ticket actually garnered more popular votes than George W. Bush. According to all the surveys, Joseph Lieberman's Jewishness was not viewed as a drawback, and many voters regarded it in a positive light.

We must acknowledge that American Jews have arrived. Never in our history have we attained such freedom and acceptance. Every area of endeavor is open to us, and Jews no longer have to adopt gentile names in order to succeed. As a youngster, I felt awkward and uncomfortable getting up to pray in a public place such as an airport. Well, as Bob Dylan famously sang, "The times, they are a-changin'...."

Today, I have no compunctions at all putting on *Tallit* and *Tefillin* at an airport terminal. I even pray on airplanes when necessary and receive nothing but respectful understanding from my fellow passengers. In fact, one time a Catholic woman asked me to say a prayer for her sister, who was ill with cancer. As a Jewish comedian who hailed from Russia once said, "America, what a country!"

From the standpoint of freedom, respect, and acceptance, the United States is the greatest land in our exile. However, one can truthfully say of our sojourn here, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." We can no longer ignore the awesome spiritual price we have paid for our American interlude. The Jews are one of the least religious groups in this country. The rates of assimilation and

intermarriage threaten the continuity of the Jewish community. Considering this problem in 1988, Charles Krauthammer had this to say: “Nothing will stop the rapid decline by assimilation of Western Jewry. The attraction of Jews *to* the larger culture and the level of acceptance of Jews *by* the larger culture are historically unprecedented. If anything, the trends augur an intensification of assimilation.” [italics added]

The situation 26 years later is much worse. All sectors of the Jewish community have been shocked by the recent Pew demographic study. It documents a 70% intermarriage rate and a frightening dissolution of the concept of Jewish identity. American Jews are renouncing Judaism or watering it down to the point of meaninglessness. If these trends continue, we are in serious trouble. I propose that we officially designate American Jews as an endangered species.

We must also consider this perplexing dilemma: Our history in the exile has been a constant struggle to obtain full political rights and acceptance; yet the dirty little secret of Jewish existence is that we owe our religious durability to anti-Semitism. In describing the Egyptian oppression, the verse states, “as they afflicted him [the Jews], so he increased and became stronger.” As long as the Jew was mistreated, segregated, and severely limited in his economic opportunities, he was steadfast in his adherence to Judaism.

We must ask, is Judaism sustainable only in conditions of persecution? Can it survive the era of American freedom and acceptance? Can it compete with the material allurements and moral relativism of this society? What lessons must we learn from the Pew report?

There is one positive statistic in this otherwise dreary survey: assimilation and intermarriage numbers drop precipitously among the various groups that identify as Orthodox. These observant Jews practice their religion and transmit it to their children by placing them in religious dayschools. The success of the Orthodox in perpetuating Jewish identity in contemporary America proves that Judaism *is* sustainable in a modern society whose values are contrary to Torah.

This country has gone through a cultural upheaval that is also known as the “sexual revolution.” Its values are based on a hedonistic philosophy of self-gratification, which denies an objective moral truth and affirms the freedom to “do your own thing” as the highest ideal. These attitudes are diametrically opposed to the fundamental principles of Judaism. Anyone whose views are shaped by the current culture will not take our religion very seriously. For Judaism to survive, we must recognize that the prevalent lifestyle is at total variance to that prescribed in the Torah.

American Jewish leaders must not stand idly by as this crisis unfolds. Looking back, we must acknowledge the failure of American Jewry to aggressively advocate for vigorous rescue policies while our brethren were being slaughtered during the Holocaust. Physical annihilation is a more tangible calamity and hence less deniable.

We must summon deep concern for the religious decimation that is another form of Jewish annihilation. Can we adopt a posture of indifference and continue with business as usual? Or, like Mordechai in the *Megillah*, should we not don sackcloth and ashes and go into the streets and “scream a loud and bitter scream”? If we don’t feel this sense of responsibility to our fellow Jews, we

will be of no real help to them. First and foremost, we must recognize the supreme obligation we have to saving our brothers and sisters and stemming the tide of assimilation before it is too late.

The current crisis is a test of the depth of our commitment to Judaism and the future of our people. Everyone should ask himself, "Do I truly believe in the veracity of Torah and the teachings of Judaism?" A major part of the problem is that countless religious leaders, whose task it is to affirm the supremacy of Jewish values, have themselves internalized the basic tenets of American culture. Many Jewish denominations have yielded to the influence of the times and have sculpted "theologies" that simply reflect contemporary thinking. Their positions on appropriate sexual behavior, *Kashrut*, *Shabbat*, abortion, conversion, and intermarriage are not rooted in classic Jewish sources. The type of Judaism they espouse is one of accommodation and the "slippery slope."

The Pew report demonstrates that only Judaism based on absolute commitment to the divinity of Torah and observance of the commandments, as they have been transmitted through the ages, is sustainable. The Jewish religion has survived the most turbulent circumstances because, for most of our history, the Jews regarded themselves as G-d's chosen people, whose mission was to scrupulously observe the commandments. Repudiation of the divine origin of Torah and our absolute obligation to perform the *Mitzvot* are the prime causes of the current crisis.

American Jews have been taught that the social values of "liberalism" and the moral beliefs spawned by the sexual revolution are the guideposts of a meaningful life. How can we reverse the downward spiral of American Jewry and increase the chances that our children's children will be proud members of our people?

To accomplish this, it is vital that we appreciate the uniqueness of Judaism. Every other religion is based on blind faith and traces back to an individual who convinced others that G-d had "spoken" to him. Judaism is founded on the Revelation at Sinai, where an entire nation witnessed miraculous phenomena and heard a voice from Heaven proclaiming the ten commandments. The veracity of this event is so compelling that both Christianity and Islam have affirmed it and sought to co-opt it as the foundation for their religions. Only the adherents of Judaism can confidently declare, "We have reason to believe."

Our conviction in the divine character of Torah motivates us to devote our energy to its study. When we immerse ourselves in Torah learning, we become aware of its limitless depth and incomparable beauty. We will also recognize its superiority to the shallow values of the bankrupt culture in which we live. The social calamities that plague our country, such as the breakdown of the family, the monumental increase in drug abuse and dependencies, excessive violence, and the inability to sustain meaningful relationships are but some of the symptoms of a society that rejects G-d and His Laws.

We must reorient ourselves to the Torah. We must study it with energy and passion, and mold our behavior according to its principles. Then we will fulfill our mission as G-d's chosen people and be a source of blessing to ourselves and our children, and a light unto the nations.

Shabbat Shalom and Purim *Sameiach*.